You are required to write an academic report that demonstrates your understanding of the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) sociolect and its use in different texts.

Remember, a sociolect is defined as: “In sociolinguistics, a sociolect or social dialect is a variety of language (a register) associated with a social group including a socioeconomic class, an ethnic group (precisely termed ethnolect), or an age group”.

You will need to refer to different literary forms, so you are advised to read from those that relate to the AAVE sociolect.

Within your report you must include the following:

• Compare and contrast the language, style and structure used in two written and two oral texts relating to AAVE.

• Analyse two of the chosen texts in terms of their historical and cultural factors. You could consider historical and social influences on the text and how these have been conveyed in the text.

• Explain the impact of social variation on language use with reference to two different examples related to AAVE.

This essay will explore the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) used in two novels; Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1983) and Angie Thomas’s *The Hate You Give* (2017), and two oral performances; Robert Johnson’s blues song “Come On in My Kitchen” (1936) and Malcom X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964). Within the essay the language, style and structure of the texts. There will also be an analysis of the cultural and historical factors contained within Walker’s novel and Malcom X’s speech along with analysing how social variation operates in Johnson’s song and Thomas’s novel. The reading of selected passages and transcripts of the audio highlights some of the typical ways AAVE can be used; like using *be* to show something that happens often, using double negatives for emphasis, consonant-cluster reduction, and copula deletion. Two clear instances of social variation; Starr Carter’s code-switching in *The Hate You Give* (Thomas, 2017) and the Southern blues pronunciation, demonstrate the adaptability and regional flavour of AAVE. The essay further explores AAVE through personal letters, modern teen conversations, emotional blues lyrics, and powerful political speech, concluding with the idea that AAVE is a vibrant, structured form of language deeply rooted in African American culture.

AAVE is described as historically characterized as ‘bad’ English” or "slang", but research, as covered by Lisa J. green (African American English a linguistic introduction, 2002), shows consistent patterns in syntax, phonology, and word use. For example, habitual *be* marks repeated or ongoing actions (“She be tagging long hind a lady” (Walker, 1983, p. 15), multiple negation can add emphasis (“I don't never git used to it” (Walker, 1982, p. 3). Copula deletion drops the linking verb (“She ugly” (Walker, 1983, p. 10), and consonant-cluster reduction turns “old” into “ol’” (Thomas, 2017 p. 10) or “them” into “’em” (Walker, 1983 p. 20). Vocabulary items like tense/time marker finna, which is used for events just about to happen (Rickford and Rickford, 2000) and “tag questions, in which the speaker assumes a positive response, as in “John be listenin’, don’t he?” or a negative response, as in “John don’t be listenin’, do he?”” (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 127) are also noteworthy. These features can serve practical functions, such as

demonstrating attitude, mood, social unity, and social distance, while tying the speakers to a shared history built upon rebellion and community resilience.

To interpret how AAVE has shaped these four texts, excerpts from the two novels have been selected for a detailed analysis, these are primarily inner thoughts and dialogue. Audio and transcriptions of Robert Johnson's blues track and transcripts of the speech by Malcom X were studied for speech indicators, prosodic rhythms, and rhetorical devices. To provide context secondary sources on segregation gendered violence, sharecropping (a system of agriculture that emerged in the Southern United States after the Civil War) in Walkers books, and on the debates between and Black Power activism in Malcom's Era (Malcom X, 1964). As an example, two cases of social variation, code-switching, in Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (Thomas, 2017) and the regional phonology in Jonson's performance illustrates how AAVE adapts to fit the speaker's setting and message.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) is written as a series of letters from Celie to God, and, later in the text, to her sister Nettie. The choice to write this way results in the reader being forced to inhabit Celie's voice alone, without a neutral narrator. Early in the novel Celie writes "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" (Walker, 1983 p. 23). The triple negation of "he don't hardly beat them" (Walker, 1983, p. 23) intensifies the sense of constant and relentless abuse. The word *cept* used in place of "except" and the dropping of the copula in in "He sick" (Walker, 1983, p. 27) reflect Southern AAVE patterns that developed when any formal education was denied to Black sharecroppers under Jim Crow (Labov, 1969). The subject-verb mismatches such as "Think, when she come home us leave here" (Walker, 1983, p. 133) and phonetic spellings "Finally she ast Where it is?" (Walker, 1983, p. 4) ("ast in place of "ask") place readers in Celie's rural community complete with its rhythms and tonal hesitations. As Celie's self-worth grows, her letters increase in length and the sentence structure in these subsequent letters at times resembles Standard American English (SAE), an example of this is "Africans wear a little sometimes, or a lot, according to Nettie" (Walker, 1983, p. 246)

Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* intersperses AAVE within a narrative written largely in SAE. This is used to dramatise Starr Carter's dual identity. A key theme in the novel is Starr's situational code-switching: she consciously suppresses AAVE while at Williamson Prep to avoid stereotypes and Societal inequalities. For instance, she deliberately chooses not to use slang or "hood" language at school, instead speaking in SAE to fit in with her white peers. As Starr explains, "Williamson Starr doesn't use slang, if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool, slang makes her 'hood'" (Thomas 2017 p.73). This internal conflict reflects both the turmoil within, and the external pressure Starr feels is imposed upon her by society. Within the prep-school setting the narration then shifts to SAE, as an example "I'm not even sure I belong at this party. There are just some places where it's not enough to be me."

Here Starr is expressing her struggle with fitting into her two different worlds, the poor, Black neighbourhood she is from and the wealthy, mostly white school she attends.

Robert Johnsons's "Come On in My Kitchen" 1936 recording embodies the Delta-region AAVE in musical form. The songs final line "You better come on in my kitchen 'Cause, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors" (Jonson, 1936) features consonant-cluster reduction (Wald, 2004). This motif, mapped to guitar embellishments using a slide, provides a characteristic bluesy feel with an intimate, confessional feel. The melodic speech style of Johnson coupled with the unique phonetic qualities of AAVE merge into a performance

register that communicates both the sadness and mutual recollection without needing a distinct chorus or audience.

Malcom X delivered his iconic speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" on two occasions in April 1964: first on April 3 at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, and then on April 12 at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. The speech itself alternates between SAE: “This is why I say it's the ballot or the bullet. It's liberty or it's death. It's freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody.” (Malcom X, 1964), and a more regional Speech Melody: “Oh, I say, you been misled. You been had. You been took.” And metaphors like “you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap, you are in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting in your lap.” highlighting the intense and volatile racial tensions in America. Comparing the situation to a powder keg, he warns that the racial injustice and oppression faced by African Americans are explosive and could ignite widespread conflict if not addressed. Alternating registers build national credibility while mobilizing grassroots support, leveraging AAVE’s oral-performative power to bridge political discourse and lived experience.

The sustained use of AAVE used by Walker through the form of letter writing contrasts sharply with the mixed SAE/AAVE design found in Thomas’s work, yet both emphasize AAVE’s structured grammar to depict Black life. Johson’s blues performance and Malcom X’s declamation show AAVE’s range, from personal confession, deepened through phonetic detail, to public action fuelled by rhythmic repetition and call-and-response patterns. Across all four of the works, AAVE’s systematic features, for example multiple negation, consonant-cluster reduction, the deletion of copula and habitual “be”, operate as expressive tools. Recognizing this way of speaking as a key part of African American cultural expression, rather than seeing it as just a “broken” form of SAE, follows the work of Labov (1969) and Green (2002), who show that it is a fully developed and meaningful variety of language.

References:

Green, L.J., 2002. *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. [e-book] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/african-american-english/ [Accessed 14 Jul. 2025].

Johnson, R., 1936. *Come On in My Kitchen*. [audio recording] Vocalion Records. Available at: Spotify https://open.spotify.com/... [Accessed 14 Jul. 2025].

Labov, W., 1969. *The logic of nonstandard English*. In: J. Alatis, ed. *Georgetown Monographs on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, pp.1–44.

Malcolm X, 1964. *The Ballot or the Bullet*. [speech transcript] Cory Methodist Church, Cleveland, Ohio and King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan, April 1964. Available at: https://www.rev.com/transcripts/the-ballot-or-the-bullet-speech-transcript-malcolm-x [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

Rickford, J.R. and Rickford, R.J., 2000. *Spoken Soul: The story of Black English*. [PDF] New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp.1–268.

Walker, A., 1983. *The Color Purple*. London: Phoenix, pp.3–246.

Wald, E., 2004. Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the invention of the blues. [PDF] New York: HarperCollins (Amistad), pp.1–342.

Bibliography:

Alim, H.S., Rickford, J.R. and Ball, A.F., eds., 2006. *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baugh, J., 2000. *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic pride and racial prejudice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bucholtz, M., 1999. 'Why be normal?': Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society*, 28(2), pp.203–223.

Green, L.J., 2002. *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. [e-book] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: African American English: A Linguistic Introduction [Accessed 11 Jul. 2025].

Johnson, R., 1936. *Come On in My Kitchen*. [audio recording] Vocalion Records. Available at: Spotify https://open.spotify.com/... [Accessed 11 Jul. 2025].

Labov, W., 1969. *The logic of nonstandard English*. In: J. Alatis, ed. *Georgetown Monographs on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, pp.1–44. [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

Labov, W., 1969. The logic of nonstandard English. In: J. Alatis, ed. *Georgetown Monographs on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, pp.1–44.

Malcolm X, 1964. *The Ballot or the Bullet*. [speech transcript] Cory Methodist Church, Cleveland, Ohio and King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan. Available at: https://www.rev.com/transcripts/the-ballot-or-the-bullet-speech-transcript-malcolm-x [Accessed 12 Jul. 2025].

McWhorter, J., 2017. *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca*. [e-book] New York: Bellevue Literary Press. Available at: https://www.scribd.com/book/338949761/Talking-Back-Talking-Black-Truths-about-America-s-Lingua-Franca [Accessed 12 Jul. 2025].

Mufwene, S.S., 2001. *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rickford, J.R. and Rickford, R.J., 2000. *Spoken Soul: The story of Black English*. [e-book] New York: Wiley, p.127. Available at: https://archive.org/details/spokensoulstoryo00rick [Accessed 11 Jul. 2025].

Smitherman, G., 1994. *Black Talk: Words and phrases from the hood to the amen corner*. [e-book] Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Available at: https://archive.org/details/blacktalkwordsph00smit [Accessed 11 Jul. 2025].

Thomas, A., 2017. *The Hate U Give*. London: Walker Books, pp.10, 73.

Walker, A., 1983. *The Color Purple*. London: Phoenix, pp.3–246.

Wald, E., 2004. *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the invention of the blues*. New York: Amistad.

Wolfram, W., 2004. *The Grammar of Urban African American Vernacular English*. In: E. Finegan and J.R. Rickford, eds. *Language in the USA: Themes for the twenty-first century*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.211–237. Available at: https://www.pitt.edu/~wovon/wolfram-papers/06-Wolfram.pdf [Accessed 12 Jul. 2025].

Winford, D., 1998. *African American Vernacular English: Structure, History and Use*. In: S. Mufwene, J. Rickford, G. Bailey and J. Baugh, eds. *African-American English: Structure, history and use*. London: Routledge, pp.229–240.

Unknown author, n.d. *African American Vernacular English*. [PDF] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313855987_African_American_Vernacular_English [Accessed 11 Jul. 2025].

Unknown author, n.d. *AAVE in Literature: The Bad, The Good, and the Great*. [online article] Book Riot. Available at: https://bookriot.com/aave-in-literature/ [Accessed 12 Jul. 2025].